

INTRODUCTION

In a famous letter of 1468 written to the doge of Venice, the great Byzantine humanist and Unionist prelate Bessarion described Venice as “almost a second Byzantium” (*quasi alterum Byzantium*). In broad historical perspective, such an accolade seems a cruel irony, as applied to the city that might more reflexively be remembered as Byzantium’s greatest enemy: the ungrateful brat that had grown up to be a partner, then a rival, and finally, in 1204, the greedy destroyer. Yet, two hundred sixty-four years later, Bessarion could praise Venice as the refuge of his people, then in flight from the Turks, and he chose to repay this city by endowing it with his valuable library.

The Dumbarton Oaks Symposium of 1993 dealt with the time period embraced between those two landmarks. While Venice represents only one component of the Italian side of our subject, the paradoxical dichotomy of Veneto-Byzantine relations just mentioned also suggests something of the spectrum of relationships we addressed. The original idea for this Symposium envisioned a broad look at Byzantium in its relation to the Mediterranean world during the empire’s later centuries. If only on practical grounds, it was decided to concentrate more specifically on the Italian dimension of that world and time period, a dimension certainly more than rich enough by itself, and clearly ripe for tapping.

The Symposium was entitled “Byzantium and the *Italians*,” not “Byzantium and *Italy*.” Were our time scale set earlier, the latter title might have applied. The Byzantine Empire certainly had a long history of direct dealings with the Italian peninsula and its population, from the Justinianic reconquest onward, beyond the terminating loss of Bari in 1071, to Manuel I’s abortive efforts at regaining a foothold on Italian soil. Under Byzantine aegis, too, Italian merchants—first from such southern towns as Amalfi, but also from Venice, then Pisa and Genoa—began to explore their opportunities for commercial enterprise in the eastern Mediterranean and beyond. Byzantine cultural models set a prevailing standard for much of Christian expression in the disorganized peninsula.

But, for our time period and our Symposium, the title became indeed “Byzantium and the *Italians*,” a wording meant to reflect the wide-ranging extent of Italian dispersion in the later medieval centuries, far beyond Italy itself, in a spatial scope overlapping and enveloping the old Byzantine world. Our time period, above all, allowed us to examine the transformation of Byzantium’s relationships with Italians. In the epochs leading up to and climaxed by 1204, we might characterize those relationships essentially as *confrontation*, as Italians strove to assert themselves in a Mediterranean world still considerably dominated by Byzantium. In the two and a half centuries following the Fourth Crusade, Byzantine contacts with Italians became increasingly complicated and diversified;

they are more appropriately investigated as interactions rather than as confrontations. This change resulted partly from a shift in the power balance, by which Byzantium was weakened while the Italian mercantile states were more confidently assertive. But the change came also from the emergence of Italian societies to a maturity that allowed them to respond far more fully than in the past to what Byzantine culture had to offer them. As a function of such changes, too, the Italians with whom Byzantium was not interacting were not only the venturers of the Italian mercantile states, but the citizens of Italian regions not initially much involved with the Byzantine world. Previously the despoilers of Byzantium, Italians had become its genuine heirs.

The Symposium's program was developed without imposing any strict agenda, without charting any fixed preconceptions, without aiming at any calculated conclusions. The nineteen speakers explored various categories of evidence, ranging from the institutional and the economic to the artistic and intellectual, including reference to the humanistic movement. Case studies in prosopography, patronage, iconography, and mentality offered new perspectives in these categories, from both specialized and interdisciplinary viewpoints. Contacts were traced both in the eastern Mediterranean sectors and in Italy itself, and examined from both the Byzantine and Italian viewpoints. As a culmination, concentrated focus was given to two meeting grounds, in Crete and Cyprus. The speakers included scholars in a wide range of disciplines from a half-dozen different countries.

The richness of knowledge and perspectives assembled reflected the extensive range and maturity of scholarly activity currently being pursued in these spheres. While the Symposium aimed at no immediate synthesis, it offered a cumulative picture of work in progress in the field. More immediately, materials presented served to answer some important questions, and to pose others that invite further investigation.

One general question of terminology and substance was raised by the very title of the Symposium and of this volume: namely, What is a Byzantine? Or, rather, Who is a Byzantine? The definition is particularly pertinent in this period of the empire's progressive territorial contraction.

This question was, indeed, a matter of interest to contemporaries as well. At the end of the fourteenth century, John Chortasmenos was to ask Demetrios Mavrianos to travel around the islands, including those conquered by the Italians, and see whether the inhabitants had become completely barbarized and forgotten the Greek tongue.¹ Presumably, for him both past history and language were signs of identity. In such places as Caffa, the answer to the question was not evident. In Crete, on the other hand, the inhabitants neither became barbarized nor lost the Greek tongue—and they eventually produced great literature in Greek. Professor Chryssa Maltezou has adduced compelling evidence for the survival of a Byzantine collective memory among the inhabitants of the island.

The question of identification—whether it was religious, ethnic, or linguistic—still remains open. One can well argue that it was primarily linguistic, and had been since the twelfth century. But the problem is rather complex, although less so for the people living in that period than it is for modern scholars. For a Byzantine answer, one might turn to

¹H. Hunger, *Johannes Chortasmenos (ca. 1370–ca. 1436/37): Briefe, Gedichte und kleine Schriften. Einleitung, Regesten, Prosopographie, Text* (Vienna, 1969), 216: 25–27.

Nicephorus Gregoras who, writing on Rhodes, said that its inhabitants were “of the same race as ourselves, and of Orthodox faith, and speaking the same Greek language as ourselves” (ὁμόφυλοί τε ἡμῖν καὶ τὴν πίστιν ὀρθόδοξοι, καὶ ταύτη δὴ τῇ καθ’ ἡμᾶς Ἑλλάδι χρώμενοι φωνῇ).²

The essays offered in this volume show different kinds of interaction between Greeks—Byzantines—and Italians in different areas. In Caffa, the predominance of the Italians is clear: The Greeks were mostly involved in small-scale production and local trade, and were not entrusted with the defense of the city. In Crete, almost the opposite situation obtained. Crete, indeed, is paradigmatic in the history of Western medieval colonization as the colony where true assimilation of the conquerors took place, and in a relatively short time. We can perceive a difference there between city and countryside, and also a mixture of elements, both in the legal system and in the development of literature—where diverse components joined to produce original works in Greek. It is clear that in the study of Crete we have come a long way beyond simply relying on information provided by official Venetian legislation or decrees on the governance of the colony, which can give a false or incomplete picture.

On the large question of the realities and perceptions of contact on Eastern soil, the dynamics of the relationship between Greeks (or Byzantines) and Italians were explored in our presentations. From Caffa there comes confirmation of what we have known for some time generally regarding the eastern Mediterranean: namely that, while the natives were involved in local trade, true competition with the Italians was beyond them. In economic terms there was certainly interdependence, but it was a relationship in which the Italians were dominant. There may be a reflection of this situation in the structure of the Byzantine urban economy as well: similarities with Italian cities there undoubtedly were, but there was no Florence and no Genoa in late Byzantium.

Ambiguities and subtleties abound in this Mediterranean world of contact. Between the Byzantines and the Italians there was hostility but there were also closeness, similarities, and differences. Are not the words of the famous statement attributed to Lucas Notaras—that the Turkish turban was better than the papal tiara—the words of a man who feels betrayed by a close friend or relative? A similar ambivalence is observable among the intellectuals, and ranges from the admiration in which the pro-unionist Demetrios Kydones held the West to the diversity of responses by Italian humanists to the fall of Constantinople.

Contact took place not only on Eastern soil, to be sure, but also in Italy itself, if in very different forms. There were, of course, the multiple and intricate contacts of men and ideas among the humanists. Among other phenomena in Italy, our considerations touched on the question of the appropriation of Byzantine manuscripts, of works of art, and of style and signification. In this sphere, conclusions ranged from those suggesting a wholesale appropriation of authority—of signifiers of empire—to those that take us into the intricacies of *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, and deconstruct the history of artistic connections between Byzantium and the West. The issue of the reception of Byzantine art objects thus has to be viewed as a component in the development of humanism as extended into a late period.

²N. Gregoras, *Byzantina Historia*, Bonn ed., 3 vols (1829–55), III, 11–13.

The relations between Byzantines and Italians constituted an important issue directly in the period of time under consideration, and they now represent a historiographic problem. Our approaches to it are themselves markers as to the state of scholarship. To put it forcefully, fifty or thirty or even twenty years ago, the answers we would have given to virtually all the questions posed in our Symposium would have been different—and a large number of these questions themselves would not even have been raised. Simply by being able to take stock of so much scholarly change, we know much better where we now are going in a field of diverse enterprise and enormous promise.

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